

## Comment on William C. Metz' "Potential Impacts of Nuclear Activities on Local Economics: Rethinking the Issue"<sup>1</sup>

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Surveys have been indicating for some time now that people have very high levels of apprehension about radiation in general and about high-level nuclear waste in particular. This sense of dread often takes the form of a stated aversion to living near nuclear waste repositories or along transportation routes leading to them. It is obvious on its face that if a sufficient number of persons moved away from the area in response to those fears or avoided it in other ways, the region would suffer economically. But we can afford to take heart, Metz says in his paper (this issue) because the empirical record to date suggests that people do not shy away in appreciable numbers even from facilities they claim to fear the most, and thus no harm is done to the local economy.

I am not at all sure that the data say what Metz claims for them. But leaving that question to one side for the moment, I would like to turn to some points that either are not addressed in this paper or are touched on only in passing.

Every social scientist knows that people do not always act on the basis of the convictions they express in surveys (a point made again and again in the research reports Metz cites in this paper). But that does not necessarily mean that the convictions expressed are not strongly or deeply felt. Why don't people move away from locations they see as dangerous? It may be, as Metz seems to suggest, that they never really meant what they said in the first place or that their feelings lack sufficient assurance. But there are other reasons why people may fail to move, as Metz also notes in passing, even when their fears are sharp and lasting, and those need to be considered as well.

One reason, obviously, is that they do not feel that they can. If people declare that they prefer not to live

within 20 mi of a nuclear waste shipment route, to use one of Metz's examples, is it really meaningful that they do not abandon the jobs and homes and neighborhoods in which they have been investing a part of themselves for years because they have learned that they actually live within that 20-mi zone? Clearly not. I have interviewed any number of people in comparable positions; most of them simply swallow those fears and cope with them as best they can.

Another reason people do not move even in the face of situations they perceive as dangerous is that they have come to feel—correctly, as it often turns out—that the fiscal and emotional costs of relocating elsewhere will only place them within range of some other peril. One resident of Three Mile Island, in explaining why he and his family do not move somewhere else, said, "There's no place in this country that I could go to that isn't slopped up.... There isn't a safe place anywhere." That, I can testify, is a very common feeling.

In both of these instances, of course, we are speaking of people whose sense of fear remains high even when they conclude that relocation offers no solutions. And if the data indicate that substantial numbers of people belong in that category, then we need to be concerned about economic effects of a kind that Metz does not address at all. One does not need to relocate to damage the local economy. It is well-known, for example, that raised levels of anxiety can affect productivity, increase health costs, and do other economic mischief—never mind what they do to the social and psychological climate in which children are raised and life lived. So the demographic fact that these fears do not dominate what Metz calls "location behavior modification" is not *by itself* compelling.

But there may be a more important point to be made. Most people who live closer to nuclear facilities than they think they should moved to those locations

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when they knew less than they do now about the risks involved. And the question then becomes not whether they will pull up stakes and move as a consequence of what they now believe but whether they and others like them would elect to move into a region they have come to think of as noxious or dangerous in the first place. That, in fact, is the point to which the main findings of the Nevada research are addressed. *If* Yucca Mountain becomes the site of a high-level nuclear waste repository, then it seems quite possible on the basis of studies done to date that people elsewhere will revise their perceptions of Nevada. And *if* people act on the basis of those revised perceptions, then it seems quite possible that they will not move there or take vacations there or do business there—in each of those cases, of course, impacting the local economy. Do the existing data prove this? No. Metz describes those findings as “predictions,” but that is a misreading of the language of the reports in which they are found. They are warnings. The evidence we now have, however, suggests that negative images can have an economic affect, and so long as that continues to be the best sense we can make of the data gathered to date, it seems strange and maybe even a bit reckless not to act on it.

I join Metz in suggesting that “further research is needed to determine” how all of this really plays out in the human mind. But what I find astonishing about this paper is the half-stated assumption running through it that in the absence of decisive data to the contrary, the repository project should proceed without further question about such matters. When people are not sure what they are doing or what impact some project they are interested in has on the human beings involved, the time has surely come to slow down rather than to lurch ahead—to reflect, to weigh options, to gather data, to become as well informed as the state of our sciences permit. It makes no sense to me that *absence of knowledge* should be cited as a reason for moving ahead with a project that everyone knows to be at least potentially risky.

## REFERENCE

1. W. C. Metz, “Potential Impacts of Nuclear Activities on Local Economics: Rethinking the Issue,” *Risk Analysis* 14, XXX–XXX (1994).